

Achievement Matters Most

**The Final Report
of the Visionary Panel
for Better Schools**

January 2002

Summary

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Letter from the Visionary Panel Co-Chairs

January 14, 2002

Dear Dr. Grasmick:

On behalf of the Visionary Panel, we are pleased to submit to you the final report of our panel. Last year, you charged us with reviewing the record of Maryland's public schools over the last decade and with fashioning a vision to make them better over the next decade. We believe our report does just that.

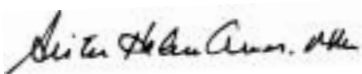
Our vision and the eight major implementing recommendations contained in this report reflect the contributions of more than 300 Marylanders. Our panel did not start with a view of the past or a plan for the future. Those came from the work of the citizens who gave freely of their time to study the past decade, to weigh the evidence on how school reform has progressed around the country, and then to form their own ideas for improvement. In other words, our vision evolved.

As co-chairs, we helped to guide the conversation, but this report was written by our seven task groups and their leaders. The ideas came from what they learned and what they thought. We are deeply in their debt for the hundreds of hours they spent on this effort, and we urge everyone to read the full reports of the task groups which form the main part of this report — each is a thoughtful summary of what needs to be done to make the state's public schools better.

The other point we must make is that our report is driven by the imperative that all of Maryland's students must learn more, and especially that the achievement gap must be closed between students of different races and economic circumstances. All students need to know more to survive in today's world. But, Maryland especially needs to educate better its poorly performing students, many of whom are African American, Hispanic, and immigrant. The numbers of students from these diverse racial and ethnic groups are growing fast, and they will soon comprise the majority of students in Maryland. Many minority students are doing well in school, but a disproportionate number are not. Maryland's economic and social future is at risk if we do not urgently improve their academic achievement.

It has been a pleasure for us to serve as co-chairs of this outstanding group of people, and we thank you for that honor. We also would like to thank George Funaro for his knowledge and steady direction of the work of the task groups and panel. We could not have succeeded without him. And to our co-editors, Teresa Knott and Nan Mulqueen, who made our deliberations come alive in words, thank you. We are also deeply indebted to the department staff who contributed so much to this effort.

Sincerely,



Sister Helen Amos



John "Jack" Jennings

Editorial Note

Parts I & II — Our Vision & Summary Recommendations

Our Vision and eight recommendations presented therein thematically reflect the beliefs of the Visionary Panel's task groups. The Vision, in general, and the Summary Recommendations, in particular, use wording taken directly from various task group reports. The bracketed references at the end indicate the task group from which the statement was derived. Some editing and paraphrasing was necessary for better coherence and transition.

Part I: Our Vision

Where We Are & Where We Need to Be

It is a pivotal time for education in Maryland. Just this month, *Education Week* named the state #1 in the nation in standards and accountability. It is Maryland's second consecutive title-holding year.

The recognition is well deserved. Maryland has spent the last 10 years establishing and refining rigorous academic standards, aligned assessments, and accountability for results. These three interlocking pieces — school reform's tripod — lay the critical foundation for student achievement.

But issuing standards alone will not yield students who can meet them, just as administering tests alone will not produce students who can pass them. Accountability clarifies where we need to be, not how we're supposed to get there.

And even a cursory look at student performance data across the state reveals that Maryland is not "there" yet — not even close. On the whole, student achievement has reached a plateau. And in every school system, significant performance gaps persist based on students' race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic circumstances, disability, and native language and culture. We can't possibly contend that we've delivered on the premise and promise of accountability — a high-quality education for every student — until *every* student meets our standards.

The Breakthrough

And so the state is poised for another leap forward. But *this* leap — this breakthrough — must occur not with laws and regulations, but with instruction — not in the statehouse, but in the classroom. Maryland's system of standards and accountability may have effectively raised expectations for all students, but good instruction is the only way to help all students meet them.

The tasks ahead are imperative. We must dramatically accelerate student achievement. And we must understand that doing so ultimately means enabling high-quality instruction — and supporting the teachers who deliver it.

The eight recommendations that follow in Part II of this report, then, can essentially be boiled down to one: *The state and local school systems must align every aspect of education — educators' preparation and professional development, policymaking, testing, curriculum, leadership, and funding — to support the classroom teacher and students.*

Transformation vs. Reformation

The Visionary Panel knows what every parent knows, what every student knows: there is no substitute for a good teacher. Teacher quality matters — *it matters more than anything else*.

So achieving the learning transformation we're talking about requires that teachers assume greater responsibility for student achievement. But it also requires that the state and local school systems assume greater responsibility for teacher preparation, development, and career-long support.

Specifically, the state and districts must commit to:

- hiring only qualified teachers and professionals and placing the most qualified staff in the poorest performing schools;
- ensuring that all teachers have access to a precise and challenging curriculum, one that is uniform in content and expectations and fully aligned with state standards;
- making sure all teachers have the technical assistance and support they need to translate curriculum into effective, individualized instruction;
- ensuring that the professional development provided to teachers is targeted to their needs and to the needs of their students;
- providing each teacher with a qualified principal whose primary responsibility is improving teaching and learning in his or her school;
- improving teacher recruitment, retention, and advancement by providing compelling incentives to prospective and current teachers;
- ensuring that state and district testing programs provide timely and relevant data that are useful for improving the classroom teaching and learning processes; and
- ensuring that instructional materials and technology resources are available to teachers to focus and improve their instruction, accelerate student learning, and facilitate data analysis.

While the responsibilities above fall primarily to the Maryland State Department of Education and each of the 24 local school systems, they must be shared by more people and in a more direct fashion than in the past. Maryland's political leadership, its business community, colleges and universities, and taxpaying citizens must commit to providing whatever it takes to educate every child to the exacting standards we've established. Without that practical commitment — entailing everything from money to organizational restructuring — reforms will most likely fail.

Of course, securing this commitment will depend, in large part, on the public's acceptance of this report's tenets. Therefore, we urge the Department to increase its outreach to all stakeholders (focusing especially on poor, minority, and culturally diverse communities), and clarify for them not only what the plan will guarantee for students but what it will demand of adults.

What must be communicated, as well, is the fact that the plan's recommendations are interdependent; that is, the effect of any one will be profoundly influenced, if not determined, by progress made in the other seven. Therefore, isolated or piecemeal implementation is no better than failing to implement the plan at all.

At the Threshold

We cannot afford to waste a single moment more in assuming the responsibilities outlined here. Each year that we *talk* about what we believe without actually *doing* it means one more year that we fail to deliver on a promise made to Maryland's students more than a decade ago. The state is poised to write another chapter in school reform history. It's time to take up the pen.

Part II: Summary Recommendations

If the eight recommendations that follow are implemented fully, they will forever change the face of public education in Maryland, ultimately laying the groundwork for:

- establishing a statewide curriculum for every grade, in every subject;
- restructuring the certification and re-certification of teachers;
- redefining the role of the principal;
- establishing a shared system of accountability calibrated to the nature and level of the problem;
- creating an aligned testing system backmapped from the High School Assessments;
- eliminating the achievement gap; and
- focusing state policy on the most important beneficiaries of education reform—students and teachers.

1. Develop a statewide K-12 curriculum.

The state must develop a K-12 curriculum that specifies what students need to know and be able to do *in each subject, at every grade level* [Learning]. The state can provide an extremely useful tool to school districts — and classroom teachers — by providing a curriculum that is fully aligned with state standards and assessments. Such a tool does not presently exist, and many districts, particularly small ones, do not have the capacity to develop it on their own. A state-endorsed curriculum made available to local districts but not mandated for adoption will likely gain widespread use. The state should work with local districts to determine the most effective and efficient way to develop and disseminate this curriculum [Accountability].

Through a process developed by the state, local school systems must align the curriculum they provide to teachers with the state curriculum. While state and local curricula alignment is essential, the state should not mandate nor review those aspects of the curricula that fall under local discretion, namely textbooks, instructional resource materials, and lesson plans.

However, the state must build local school systems' capacity to translate curriculum into instruction by providing:

- documents that link standards and curriculum;
- examples of grade-level activities that may be used to teach the curriculum;
- model lessons and best practices; and
- professional development in proven instructional techniques [Learning].

2. Align K-12 curriculum and testing.

The curricular, instructional, and assessment programs of Maryland's state and local school systems must be closely coordinated, supportive of each other, and aligned with the Maryland Content Standards. To ensure the continuity of elementary, middle, and high school expectations, and to ensure that each, feeding seamlessly into the next, ultimately prepares students for the high-stakes High School Assessments, Maryland will need to re-examine instruction and testing at all school levels.

The complexity of coordinating all elements of an aligned system of curriculum, instruction, and testing requires a clear statement of the state's responsibility in this effort. The *state's primary role* is the development and administration of high-quality summative (school and system level) assessments that are used for making decisions about accountability. The *state's secondary role* is to provide assistance to local systems in the use of formative assessments that are fully aligned with the Maryland Content Standards and that yield ongoing diagnostic information about individual student performance. Formative assessments are intended to help teachers select the most appropriate instructional strategies for meeting each student's needs [Assessment].

The focus of a good assessment system must be improved student learning, and standards and measurements should be a natural part of the infrastructure supporting teacher decision making at all levels. The system should include a variety of testing and response models and provide information on the development of basic skills as well as information about the application of those basic skills in solving problems. Professional development must be provided for *all* staff to ensure that assessments are understood by all and placed in their proper perspective [Assessment].

Assessments are valuable tools to aid in instructional improvement, but they constitute only one element of the entire system. The state should strive for balance, encouraging

the use of multiple sources of information for making instructional decisions about individual children. Ultimately, the state must make certain that its assessment system is comprehensive, aligned, and useful as a support tool for instruction [Assessment, Achievement Gap].

3. Widen the focus of accountability from low-performing schools to all schools.

Maryland's education system must meet a number of related challenges over the next 10 years. In particular, our schools must significantly increase achievement for all students; speed up the pace of academic improvement statewide; and close achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity, family income, and other demographic characteristics. To help accomplish this, the state's approach to accountability must change [Accountability].

For example, while the current system is effective in focusing resources and attention on the lowest performing schools, it now must also provide more systematic and consistent recognition, encouragement, and guidance to *all* schools in Maryland, including those that are neither especially low-performing nor making especially rapid progress. While the current approach holds each *school* accountable for results, it now must also more effectively engage local school districts and their leaders, as well as individual principals, teachers, and parents, in a system of *shared accountability* for results. While the current approach provides for interventions in low-performing schools, it now must also equip every school with the tools and capacity to be data-driven — to use the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) and other relevant data to guide a continuous improvement process. While the current approach considers the progress schools make with their students overall, it now must also consider the performance and progress of important subgroups of students, to ensure that none is left behind [Accountability].

Finally, a graduated series of rewards and interventions is an essential component of our strategy to help all schools make progress. Under this proposed policy, there will be many more schools than at present identified as making satisfactory progress *and* many more identified as needing improvement, including some that are relatively high performing but not improving each year. Consequently, there must be a more highly differentiated set of interventions and rewards, matched closely to the performance of each school/district and its respective capacity [Accountability].

4. Make every school accountable for the performance of every child.

Perhaps the most important variable in improving student learning is a qualified and effective teacher. Teacher preparation and certification must ensure that teachers are able to demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to promote student achievement [Teacher Quality]. Arguably then, the first level of school accountability resides with the teacher, together with an effective and capable principal who provides the leadership necessary to achieve instructional excellence across the curriculum [Leadership].

The accountability for individual teachers and principals must be based on an assessment system that yields timely, accurate, and relevant data on the progress made by individual students and groups of students from one assessment interval to the next. Gains in student achievement must be one component of an individual accountability system, not the sole component. Teachers must also be accountable for meeting standards for rigorous instruction, principals for demonstrating effective leadership, and both for effective outreach to parents [Accountability].

An effective accountability system must also be guided by a comprehensive school plan designed to eliminate achievement gaps and aggressively monitored by the school district. The plan must include a description of the measures that will be used and the process by which data will be collected and evaluated to measure change in student learning [Achievement Gap].

The comprehensive school plan requires, therefore, an assessment system at both the local and state levels that provides valid and reliable information that can be used to support high-stakes decisions. Data produced from the system should be:

- relevant and timely so that appropriate instructional decisions can be made;
- disaggregated to ensure information on the progress of every child;
- supportive of the establishment of different performance levels so that students can demonstrate high performance as well as acceptable performance;
- communicated to all stakeholders — including parents, principals, teachers, and students — in a user-friendly and easy-to-understand manner; and
- informative and supportive of the continuous improvement of school and student performance [Assessment, Accountability].

5. Certify only those teachers who can demonstrate high-level knowledge and teaching skills.

The state must create a comprehensive performance-based teacher preparation and certification system that is aligned with Pre-K–12 student achievement [Teacher Quality]. To be truly effective, the certification process must be flexible, developmental, grounded in content knowledge, and standards/performance-based. While allowing for multiple paths to certification, the process must ensure rigor through adherence to a common set of standards, as well as to the major tenets of the *Redesign of Teacher Education*, including the need for extensive preparation in academic content coupled with an intensive internship in a school classroom setting [Teacher Quality, Accountability].

To determine the effectiveness of universities' teacher preparation programs and give them a critical basis for ongoing program improvement, on-the-job performance of first- and second-year teachers should be assessed, summarized, and reported back to the institutions from which the teachers were graduated. An important indicator of program quality would be local school system satisfaction with evidence that preparation and certification needs are being met [Teacher Quality].

Support for teachers early in their careers is especially important. Local school systems should advocate modified teaching schedules and focused mentoring during the first three to four years of teachers' experience and should build the resources to facilitate such an advocacy [Teacher Quality].

Of course, in emphasizing the importance of *early* support, we do not absolve the state and local school systems from providing teachers *ongoing* support as well. Teachers must be assured professional development that is focused, continual, job-embedded, and career-long. On-site facilitation and individual guidance are needed as teachers plan and carry out professional development plans and certificate renewal requirements [Teacher Quality, Assessment]. Indeed, fulfilling the vision of *Every Child Achieving* — so vitally important to this state's well-being — is predicated on the strongest possible commitment to a vital professional development program for every teacher statewide. To provide time for and access to this professional development, and to enhance the status of the teaching profession, state and local funding should ensure that teachers be offered 12-month positions [Teacher Quality].

6. Place more highly qualified teachers and principals in our lowest performing schools.

The state must address the quality and distribution of principals, teachers, and student services staff in low-performing schools and in schools with high concentrations of minority and economically disadvantaged students. Research has shown that the difference in teachers' effectiveness is the single most important factor accounting for differences in students' academic growth from year to year. *Minority Achievement in Maryland* (1998) recommended that schools carefully assign teachers because "teacher effectiveness is a dominant causative factor affecting student growth. Further, teacher effects are so cumulative that if a student receives two rather ineffective teachers in succession, the loss in growth is usually not recoverable" [Achievement Gap].

Therefore, intensive district-level training and ongoing support must be provided to teachers who staff these schools and to those who move from schools with low-minority enrollments to schools with high concentrations of minority students. To function effectively as a teacher or principal in Maryland today, job-embedded professional development must also prepare new and seasoned educators for working in schools that are more diverse [Achievement Gap].

Most importantly, local districts and employee unions should work closely together to ensure that local district policies and provisions of the collective bargaining agreement permit and support assignment policies needed to staff low-performing schools with the most qualified teachers and principals [Accountability]. Specific recruitment strategies and incentive programs must follow these agreements. Opportunities to work in such schools must be made more attractive and satisfying to excellent teachers [Teacher Quality]. And because research repeatedly shows that dynamic and competent leadership is particularly critical to reshaping low-performing schools, school districts should institute means for providing job security for principals undertaking high-risk, difficult school leadership challenges [Leadership].

7. Shift the focus of the principal from administration to instruction.

For all schools and students to reach their potential, first-rate teachers must be supported by administrators who are focused on instruction [Assessment]. Moreover, the strong instructional leadership of school principals is an essential component of teacher retention. Every school must have a principal who establishes and maintains a school environment that is committed to effective teaching and high student achievement. This key factor is critical to recruiting and retaining excellent teachers [Teacher Quality].

For these reasons and more, *the principal's primary role must be that of instructional leader and that role must take priority over all other roles and responsibilities*. What is needed is a fundamental redesign of the principalship from a position that has traditionally focused on school management to one that concentrates on improving all aspects of teaching and learning [Leadership].

To accomplish this, every school should have a new position, that of Building Manager. This role must be separate from the assistant principal, who clearly must be part of the instructional leadership team within the school. The Manager would be responsible for such functions as transportation, school facility use, maintenance, business matters, and cafeteria supervision — all support functions that now fall to the principal [Leadership].

8. Demand full funding of existing reform plans designed to solve our worst educational problems.

It is a poignant observation that “There are no throw-away kids.” Indeed, it would be unconscionable for state leaders to create high standards to improve student achievement, then turn their backs on providing students the resources necessary to meet those standards.

In 1999, the Maryland State Board of Education adopted a comprehensive plan developed by a statewide task force of educators, business leaders, and community members to ensure that no child, regardless of his or her circumstances, would be left behind in our movement toward higher standards. This plan, *Every Child Achieving*, lays out a detailed and comprehensive process that, when properly implemented, will minimize the possibility of any child being denied the high-quality education envisioned in the Maryland School Performance Program. In a recent report, Achieve, Inc., a national organization consisting of governors and top corporate executives, called *Every Child Achieving* “the most thoughtful intervention plan in the country.”

Ironically, however, the resources to implement the recommendations of *Every Child Achieving* have not been forthcoming at a level that even approaches the amount recommended. Such a failure cannot be allowed to continue, particularly as Maryland's students move inexorably toward the high-stakes High School Assessments, which, in 2007, will determine whether or not students graduate.

The State of Maryland has a constitutional responsibility to provide adequate resources for public education, and this obligation clearly extends as well to the 23 counties and Baltimore City. We face months of debate on the issue of adequacy, but we must push for the full funding of *Every Child Achieving*.

The citizens of the state must speak unequivocally on this issue and demand the political courage of state and local leaders to provide the needed resources to ensure that the goal of educational reform in Maryland is realized: high-quality education for every student in every school and school system in the state [Leadership, Teacher Quality, Assessment, Accountability, Achievement Gap, Learning, Public Support].

Funding Matters

Of course, implementing the recommendations in this report will require a considerable amount of money. The Visionary Panel did not directly address securing this money, as we did not want to duplicate the work of the Commission on Education Finance, Equity, and Excellence (Thornton Commission). The Thornton Commission, established by the General Assembly in 1999, has conducted a comprehensive review of the state's finance system and made recommendations to ensure statewide adequacy and equity in education financing.

The recommendations outlined in this report, coupled with the Thornton Commission's funding initiatives, will give us the direction and resources we need to transform education and accelerate achievement in the decade ahead.

A Final Word

All key points made in this summary may be found in the seven Panel task group reports that are available on the web site, www.msde.state.md.us. Click on the Visionary Panel icon on the home page.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why a Visionary Panel now?

Nearly a year ago, Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick, State Superintendent of Schools, became acutely aware of a plateau in achievement by Maryland public school students. Ten years ago, the *Report of the Governor's Commission on School Performance* (Sondheim Report) outlined a plan for education reform through accountability. Dr. Grasmick felt another group of citizens—educators and non-educators—could outline a plan that would heighten the achievement of students in the 21st century.

2. What was the process?

Appointed by the State Superintendent, a group of nearly 300 representatives of education, business, non-profits, parents and students, and other citizens gave enormous time and energy to this effort. Over seven months, they reviewed the state's progress, researched and analyzed the latest educational information, heard local and national experts, deliberated, and shared their expertise. The seven task groups submitted 33 recommendations to the Panel. The Panel consolidated them into eight final recommendations. These recommendations comprise its final report, *Achievement Matters Most*.

3. Where does the Visionary Panel's report go from here?

Dr. Grasmick will take the Panel's recommendations to stakeholders at regional forums. Five forums will be held across the state. Simultaneously, she will develop implementation strategies. Within the next several months, she will submit her implementation plan to the Maryland State Board of Education.

4. Where do I find additional information?

For more information, go to the Maryland State Department of Education Web site, www.msde.state.md.us, and click on the Visionary Panel icon. The entire final report of the Visionary Panel can be found in the Update section.



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